

The Spinnaker

By Michael McGrath

It had been four hours and ten minutes since he had taken them. Old reliable Mousey was always a phone call away after a long day and a dark evening pushing the bright side out at work. The kitchen had been extra hot so that his balance wobbled under the steam when he opened the oven doors to remove the scorched trays from their stainless steel coffins and his stomach had heaved more than once to the starched scent of boiled potatoes.

It had been four hours and twelve minutes since he had taken them and Mousey had been right to give him fair warning. 'I'm giving you fair warning now kid,' he had said, and 'mind that there's someone around for a few hours in case you take a turn.' Mousey had always been very good to him and though his gear could clear half a pay packet, it was nothing if it wasn't kosher.

Dillon sat alone in the darkness of his room and listened to his mother's grandmother clock tick the inevitable seconds to an empty corridor which no one could perceive in that moment but himself. The bed was soft beneath him but he pressed his back against its head and the cold wall so as to avoid the horizontal horrors which he knew awaited him in the liminal spaces of sleep. Mousey had been very good to him.

The walk home was misty and he had swallowed them over the bridge as the drizzle spat cool vapour in his face and the rushing water gargled over the old rocks and on towards the city. He felt nothing in the broadest sense until he made it through the front door and removed all items of clothing in the kitchen. The hot shower had stirred his blood and he fancied his red cells dissolving like oats into warm milk over a fiery hob. The kitchen window began to move a little to the east then, and becoming aware of his nakedness before the world, he switched out the lights and fled to the sanctity of his bedroom. Locking the door from the inside and frantically flinging clothes from his wardrobe, he pulled his nautically themed pyjama set from beneath a pile of freshly folded stockings. The newness of the soft fabric had been

comforting against his skin and he felt every inch the seasick sailor clinging to the furniture in the swaying cabin of his room.

The high seas were merciless and between the swells he had fallen and cut his head more than once but rallied to take control of the tiller and hold it steady through the groaning mountains of dark water. To the east, he could make out the familiar yellow glow of civilization and biting down on his bottom lip, he veered boldly toward it – fearing the rolling troughs would roll and swallow his vessel in a tumbling gorge. Yet the peaked crests dulled then died on his approach to the shore and he watched the silver sands sparkle beneath the white moonlight and marvelled at the expanse of the empty beach. Throwing his anchor through the window, he called out to the new world and declared his benevolent intentions. He had been still then, and awestruck he gazed in silence at the virgin land before him. Its beauty transcended modernity and he wept the warm tears of one confronted with the purity of innocence incarnate.

Long hours he spent by the lonely beach and he thought of the boots of empires in shallow sands and the perils of Sir Francis Drake in the Caribbean. The inevitability of westward expansion married romance to tyranny and they danced merrily along the open shoreline under a canopy of navigational stars. Loose grains had begun to spin torrents of dust beneath their heels and they whirled up into soft twisting clouds of white tenderness, lulling and bobbing over tropical horizons.

Presently, he began to feel weary by the lateness of the hour and so closed the curtains of his cabin window before retiring to the bare sheets of his stiffening bed. However sleep could find no welcome in its arms and pushed him once more into the frailty of his world and so with regret he sat up straight and placed his aching back against the cool certainty of his bed's wooden head.

Here he could consider tight jaws and grinding teeth while shadows crept deliberately about the walls in human spectres – crawling beneath the bed and re-emerging in macabre masks with sharp toothed grins and vicious eyeballs of the whitest winter ice. Together they masked and unmasked behind painted Chinese fans of splendid gold

sprinkled paper and beckoned malevolently to the unknown chasms in each corner of the dark and insidious space.

The horror grew in pounding heartbeats and skipping breaths, whipping distorted shrieking faces to a spiralling vortex of white noise and the pleading souls of the damned. His skull compressed in groans beneath the crazed pressure of swirling air and placing his hands on his ears he screamed from the deepest wells of a churning stomach of rotating bile.

And then it stopped. Dead.

Silence unfolded into the chilled room and extinguished the bells ringing within his fragmented consciousness. The room was his room. The bed was his bed. He knew this now. But he was not alone.

A low wind whistled through the window in the room's corner and his patterned curtains flitted and billowed to its chime – rolling in soft waves on jingling metal rings along the curtain rail. The company of long shadows remained bound in the corner and when he first noticed the silhouette, he tensed and dragged the blankets from the bottom of the bed up beneath his chin. The silhouette did not stir. But it was human in form and it was unmistakable.

Dillon wondered how long it had been there and in which direction it was facing. His eyes darted about the room to find an implement that he may fling at it or strike it with should the being move toward him. Fixing his eyes upon the shadow, he placed his right hand on the bedside lamp which he then lay readily by his side above the thin blankets.

'Who's there?' he called to the darkness. At first, the silhouette did not waver, but as Dillon mustered the courage to shout out once more, he noticed the figure move slowly from the shadow and in terror he gripped the wooden base of his lampshade. The being would murder him – it would murder him and he would finally die.

'Go back!' he screamed in a pitch that barely seemed his own, raising the lamp in twitching arms above his head.

'Put it down Dillon.'

The voice had been unexpected and its authority boomed in majesty throughout space. The young man dropped his weapon and sank to a dishevelled and foetal wreck upon the scattered bedding. Broken at last to the world.

The figure emerged in its fullness from the corner's gloom and through the burning of his tear soaked eyes, Dillon perceived what stood before him. A black haired man rubbed one hand along the edges of his thick beard and then slid both hands into the trouser pockets of his dark blue, three piece suit. With faint interest, he began to examine the various objects which lay scattered about on the furniture of the room – ignoring the rasping breaths of his delirious host.

'What is this?' whispered Dillon as he pulled bedcovers tightly around his frail body.

At first, the man did not respond, preferring to hold a model spacecraft aloft in the moonlight to examine its inscriptions and detail. Carefully placing the plastic vessel back on its stand and sliding his fingers along the surface of the wooden desk, his voice came softly and his eyes remained turned from the cowering young man.

'This is a beautiful room Dillon, an oasis in the vast desert no doubt.' As he spoke, the man pulled a wide backed chair from behind the desk and rotating it to face Dillon, he settled into its soft cushioned seat and crossed one leg above the other, placing his interlocking fingers casually upon his lap. 'I see you have added much to your father's old record collection,' he continued, pointing towards the shelving near the bed, 'vinyl is a costly commodity in our new century and yet you persist undeterred – why do you think this is?'

Dillon opened his dry lips but could not speak. The man's dark blue suit was thickly expensive and as he sat cross legged on the office chair, Dillon noticed the fine crease along the front of the trouser leg which came down a measured length above wine speckled stockings and brown pointed shoes. The fitting of the man's apparel was a masterclass in tailoring and Dillon closed his eyes tightly in horror to the ridicule of his noticing.

'Do not be ashamed of vinyl records my boy,' the bearded man was smiling, 'they are neither cause nor solution – but they are in many ways your keeper.'

Dillon's gaze wandered to the old and carefully ordered record sleeves on the shelving and then quickly back to his visitor. Sitting in the dark room, he could only make out his more prominent features and he longed to see the intent in the man's eyes.

The stranger seemed vaguely amused by Dillon's silence and reached inside his jacket pocket, removing from it a classical silver pocket watch which he examined and then rolled around aimlessly in his outstretched hand. The circular disk glowed a brilliant white against his dark outlines and the chain sparkled as it flowed between the curvatures of his moving fingers.

'Why do you cry,' the bearded man asked, 'is it for yourself or for the want and need of another?'

Dillon counted three measured breaths and spoke the words: 'for another.'

The bearded man chuckled and placed his hand casually beneath his jaw as he considered his young host.

'This room is a testament of the individual my boy, a shrine to the indelible truth that one may only be accountable to oneself, a single facet amongst many in a flawed existence which you -to your credit – comprehend.'

Dillon scratched at the corner of his mouth and considered opening it as the man arose from the chair and walked to the window once more. Allowing the chain to rise and fall behind him in his clasped hands, he gazed at the red and yellow patterned curtains and spoke with his back turned to the faint young man on the bed.

'The reason for this current impasse lies within your doubting of the fundamental truth which you have known since childhood.'

'Autonomy.' Dillon croaked the word and knew it to be key.

The man's affirmation was swift.

'You will never see me again,' he grinned as he turned to face his young charge, 'you will never have need to.'

Dillon felt electrified by his desire for the stranger to stay and spoke in murmurs as the man approached his bed and placed cold hands beneath his body and head, cradling him down

to the frigid embrace of the solid mattress. As he reached towards the man's sleeve, he marvelled at the fabric and texture which was falling to ash in his hands and he knew he was right to marvel. To wonder at the craft of the tailor was as glorious as the expanse of silver sands before him on the shoreline where his boat lay listless and awaiting his return to its salt eaten deck. Placing one foot on the window ledge, he drew in his anchor and sounded the horn – waving farewell to the empty beach and all it had become, before turning hard to starboard, firing the small engine and chugging away from the mystic landfall and into dark open seas. Before him, the flat water stretched out to new horizons and brushing back tears of joy from his eyes, he began to appreciate the significance of his solitude on the moonlit surface of the vast ocean.

The End

Michael McGrath bio: Michael McGrath is an emerging Irish fiction writer who has been published both nationally and internationally in journals such as Roadside Fiction, The Ogham Stone and most recently in the January 2015 edition of Literature Today. He achieved success in two categories at the University of Limerick Arts Awards 2014: 1st place in the Short Story category for his work Entropy and 3rd in the Poetry section for The Trouble With Atoms. He is currently working on his first novel. He works as a second level English teacher and lives in Cork City, Ireland.